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Understanding informal networks in higher education institutions: Theoretical concepts from a Russian and Norwegian perspective

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ARSTRACT

This article discusses theoretical concepts with regard to informal networks in the Russian and Norwegian society and higher education institutions (HEI) in particular. Informal networks are operative in both public and private organizations criss-crossing social and job-related networks within these organizations. Formal and informal contacts between representatives of HEIs in the Barents region are often the result of years of close cooperation on student exchange, research projects and joint academic programmes. The aim of this study is to explain theoretical perspectives in relation to informal networks from a Norwegian and a Russian perspective. Understanding both perspectives is essential before describing informal networks across different HEIs in the Barents region and valuable if we seek to study the impact of informal networks on the formal decision-making process. Informal networks are perceived differently because the formal structure in which they operate is different. Analysing the formal structure is therefore suggested in order to better understand the different perspectives surrounding formal/informal networks.

Keywords: *formal networks, informal networks, higher education institutions, formal structure, Barents region*

INTRODUCTION

This article contributes to the debate on challenges and opportunities faced by international higher education faces in the twenty-first century by analysing two theoretical perspectives on informal networks. Formal and informal contacts between representatives of higher education institutions (HEIs) in the Barents region – to be distinguished from informal networks – are often the result of years of close cooperation on student exchange, research projects and joint academic programmes. The primary intention of educational collaboration in the Barents region was initially to ensure good neighbourly relations, economic and social development, and stability (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2011–2012). International collaboration across this region is most extensive between Norway and the Russian Federation (Hønneland 2009, 36), and educational cooperation is among the sectors where cooperation has increased in recent years, despite different views with regard to the conflict in Ukraine. The increasing number of Russian students studying in Norway (NIFU 2015, 14) can be seen as a good indicator of this development. Moreover, the University of Nordland and seven Russian HEIs have established an international formal network to promote and develop a Bachelor's programme in Circumpolar Studies (BCS). Seven of the eight HEIs are located in North-west Russia while the leading HEI is located in northern Norway.

The focus in this article, however, is on informal networks, which are to be understood as personalized grids such as network groups and criss-cross job-related and social networks. Identifying informal networks between representatives of HEIs across Norway and Russia is also one of the aims of the NORRUSS project "Higher education in the High North: Regional restructuring through educational exchanges and student mobility". One of the research questions of the NORRUSS project is: What kind of informal networks are developed and maintained as a result of student exchange and by the educational institutions? (NORRUSS 2012, 6). The aim of this project is to study educational cooperation and student exchange between Norway and Russia through the context of the existing cooperation between the University of Nordland and seven institutions of higher education in Northwest Russia.

The term formal structure is used to distinguish public laws, organization charts, policy documents, regulations, and formal hierarchical procedures from more informal structures, such as norms, values, and social groups. Informal networks, crucially, are assumed to be understood differently in the Russian and Norwegian context. This article is an attempt to elaborate on this assumption by discussing two theoretical ap-

proaches with regard to informal networks in Russian and Norwegian society and HEIs in particular. Understanding both perspectives is essential before describing informal networks across different HEIs in the Barents region and valuable if we seek to identify the outcomes of such networks or examine the extent to which their power or influence is guided by formal structures. Hence, society – including the administration of HEIs – is regarded as a system of interconnected formal and informal levels. As this article illustrates, the relation between the formal structure and informal networks is perceived to be different in the Russian society compared to Norwegian society.

The article starts with a background on the need to analyse informal networks within HEIs. This is followed by a Western theoretical perspective on formal and informal networks, as Norwegian perspectives are assumed to be heavily influenced by Western approaches. In this paper I use "the West" and "the Western World" as referring to a group of states sharing a more or less similar political and economic ideology such as the United States, Canada, members of the European Union / European Economic Area, Australia and New Zealand. A similar analysis from a Russian perspective will be outlined in the third part. The Russian perspective discussed below provides a rather different understanding of what an outsider might regard as a similar phenomenon. In the final section, I return to the objective of this study and discuss the differences and similarities between both approaches in more detail.

INFORMAL NETWORKS WITHIN HEIS

Organizations consist of formal and informal networks. The latter are not limited to the public or private sector or to a specific industrial sector such as education. Informal networks are also characterized as unstable, non-transparent and frequently criss-crossing job-related and social networks. Although the impact of these networks on organizational performance can vary, they are assumed to play an important role in the formal decision-making process of organizations, including HEIs located in the Barents region. For instance, informal networks, can have an impact on the stability of policy, as in how internationalization and academic practices are valued by HEIs over time. Informal networks are also assumed to have an impact on the attrition of key personnel such as decision-makers, patrons or so-called liaisons. Liaisons are by Tichy, Tushman and Fombrun (1979, 508) defined as individuals linking two or more clusters. These individuals, often operating at the centre knot, are perceived to have great power and influence within the informal network, more than the formal structure would grant them. With regard to the BCS cooperation, Sundet (2015), for instance, emphasizes the high turnover among the Russian participants of the network responsible for the coordination of this programme.

Hence, collaboration between HEIs can be affected if particular persons with a commitment to international cooperation leave – or are forced to leave – the institution as discussed above, especially if informal networks influence the outcome of the decision-making process to a larger extent than the formal ones. This is all the more urgent when these individuals are key persons with whom education institutions on the other side of the border over time have established good contact. In another example of the importance of individual contributions, Sokolov (2014, 10) argues that federal support for HEIs in Russia largely depends on the personal connections of the university's top management. Informal networks can also act as a bestowal of trust or as an alternative to time-consuming formal procedures. In the former, informal networks could be regarded as builders of trust between partners from different nation states in educational cooperation. Educational cooperation between individuals across different states can create social networks based on trust gained after a long relationship. When issues relating to admission rules, student requirements and approval of acquired credits need to be solved, trust can often be a decisive factor. However, as noted before, speaking of informal networks among representatives of Russian and Norwegian HEIs is problematic, as from a strictly theoretical perspective, the term is understood differently.

Also, identifying informal networks across Norwegian and Russian HEIs in the Barents region can be challenging. Besides issues of data collection – would people consider themselves to be members of an "informal network" and how are such shadow networks understood by staff across different levels of an organization – these "hidden" informal networks often leave no traces or track record (Ledeneva 2013, 16; Lauth 2010, 38). Furthermore, even if managers are often not even aware of the existence or the outcome of informal network(s) within their organization, organizations – whether private or state controlled – are often reluctant to provide relevant data on the performance and development of informal networks (Sanders, Snijders and Stokman 1998, 105). Rather than revealing informal networks as such, for example by identifying participants or discussing power structures, this article will therefore discuss the different theoretical concepts in relation to such networks. This will also illustrate how such concepts could have a different impact on the daily lives of people working at HEIs in the Barents region.

The main argument here is that describing or comparing informal networks across different states in the Barents region is challenging because of different theoretical understandings of these networks. Actors from different institutions interpret informal networks differently, not only from a theoretical point of view, but also from an

empirical vantage point as is illustrated by an analysis of the data collection in relation to the NORRUSS project. For example, when asked about the role of networks within educational collaboration, representatives of Russian HEIs frequently cited "trust" as a key concept whereas Norwegian interviewees would emphasize "personal commitment" and "knowing the right people". Interviews with representatives of Norwegian and Russian HEIs for the purpose of the NORRUSS project were conducted between January 2013 and February 2015. Summing up, from a Russian theoretical perspective, informal networks are understood to be more than personal contact during social activities between participants of formal meetings, as discussed below.

INFORMAL NETWORKS FROM A NORWEGIAN PERSPECTIVE

Before discussing informal networks from a Russian perspective, this section provides a brief overview of intra-organizational studies of informal networks by Western researchers. As "individual interest" was a rather insufficient explanation for the presence and development of informal networks over time, there emerged increasing scientific interest in contributing to the debate on informal networks (Reif, Monczka and Newstrom 1973, 389; Sanders, Snijders and Stokman 1998, 105; Stevenson and Bartunek 1996, 76).

Generally, research from a Western perspective on informal networks has two main concerns, one aiming to disclose informal networks, their members, roles, and power structures (see, for instance, Rigby for a detailed study of the network around Stalin) and the other studying the outcomes of these networks, including the effectiveness of informal power structures in organizational performance. Most of this intra-organizational research has been focused on private institutions – mainly operating in the Western world – whereas organizations largely controlled by the state such as HEIs, and especially organizations operating in Russia are underrepresented. Most of the studies discussed below are therefore based on organizations operating in the private sector and in a few cases state controlled enterprises.

Organizations can be understood as social groupings with relatively stable patterns of interaction over time. Social interaction may lead to the development of networks, for instance, between individuals sharing similar cultural viewpoints (Stevenson and Bartunek 1996, 76). Such networks are by Mitchell (1969, 2) defined as "a specific set of linkages among a defined set of persons, with the additional property that the characteristics of these linkages as a whole may be used to interpret the social behavior of the persons involved." The best example of a formal network within an organization

is the organizational map, showing the relationship between a manager and his or her employees or between departments and divisions across an organization. In many classical works (especially within the positional tradition), networks or their outcomes are often studied by analysing the formal relations between different people and groups based on their formal positions or roles, for instance by reference to the organizational chart. The positional tradition has been criticized for neglecting individual contributions and for failure to grasp the ongoing process in organizations (Tichy, Tushman and Fombrun 1979, 511; Krackhardt and Hanson 1993, 111). Formal networks fail to grasp the ongoing process in organizations because power and influence are not necessarily exercised through formal networks (Cobb 1986, 234; Tichy, Tushman and Fombrun 1979, 511). Influential "hidden" networks are not visible on the organizational chart although studies explaining how the work actually gets done within an organization emphasize the importance of these networks (Flap, Bulder and Völker 1998, 131) and how power or influence is frequently channelled through them (Groat 1997, 41; Tichy, Fushman and Fombrun 1979, 511). These "hidden" networks or "informal organizations" often explained as alternative networks among employees from different levels in order to fulfil, for instance, unexpected complex or highly variable tasks (Krackhardt and Hanson 1993, 104). According to Groat (1997, 40), the informal organization encompasses all the channels of interaction and relationships that exist in an organization outside the organization's formal management structure. Tichy, Tushman and Fombrun (1979, 509-510) distinguish four types of such relations – exchange of affect, exchange of power and influence, exchange of information and exchange of goods or services – and argue that the dichotomy formal/informal is reflected in all these linkages. Thus, informal networks are understood as something more than "knowing the right people" or "personal contacts" based on a long-term relationship. Moreover, they should not be confused with the culture of an organization. Groat (1994, 40) argues that informal networks expand "quickly" and adapt to changing circumstances in contrast to the rather slower pace of an organization's culture. Stevenson and Bartunek (1996, 75) define organizational culture as "the meanings and understandings that members share about their work and the expression of these meanings in particular behaviours".

Informal networks are often associated with negative impact such as ineffectiveness, corruption, shadow deals, etc. Such networks, however, can also serve as a valuable resource for individual employees, for instance in finding solutions to satisfying individual needs (Reif, Monczka and Newstrom 1973, 389; Groat 1997, 41) and as a means of communication, cohesion, and protection of integrity (Barnard 1962). In fact, informal networks may counterbalance some of the presumably negative aspects. They can fight

corruption through internal systems of checks and balances (Ledeneva 2013, 249). In addition to the individual level, informal networks can be a major source of strength and added value for the organization as a whole (Groat 1997, 41). Flap, Bulder and Völker (1998, 109) even argue that informal networks are an equally important factor of production as the organizations' financial capital, buildings, and staff. Consequently, acquiring skills to understand and deal with informal networks becomes an essential part of the management practices for an organization's decision-makers.

Studies of informal networks were typically based on the idea that the informal organization is more effective in terms of organizational performance than the formal organization. In practice, formal hierarchies and informal networks can overlap and sometimes even be in conflict. As concluded before, increasing interest has since been shown in research to describe informal networks (for example by examining those who are included or who, in the words of Tichy, Tushman and Fombrun (1979, 508), is seen as "the liaison" or "the bridge" of the network – the individual who is a member of multiple clusters). Similarly, more research has been devoted to study the performance of informal networks (see, for instance, Reif, Monczka and Newstrom 1973, 390–391).

Instead of emphasizing the needs or benefits for the individual or organization, Argyris (1957), Groat (1997) and more recently Alena Ledeneva (2013) from a Russian perspective, seek to explain the development of informal networks from a different premise. They argue that complexities of the formal structure lead to the development of informal social groups that are necessary, as Groat (1997, 41) puts it, to "fill the gap". The formal structure, for instance, could include complicated and time-consuming internal reporting procedures or incoherent formal regulations enacted by the legislator. These internal procedures are then bypassed in order to ensure that a particular deadline is being met. Groat's perspective is strongly related to Ledeneva's Russian perspective that I will outline below. Groat (1997, 41) emphasizes the lack of formal structure in the following example:

> *Thus if a company has no proper system for staff development and appraisal, then when an internal transfer is being mooted, the only way information on the candidate can pass is by informal personal contacts between managers, and the only way internal candidates can find opportunities to move around is by keeping an ear to the ground on their "network".'*

Ledeneva emphasizes the absence of a well-functioning formal structure in her study of informal networks in Russian society. Her angle is slightly different from most of the perspectives discussed in this section where the main focus is on individual contributions or organizational performance as an explanation for the abundance or development of informal networks. Assuming that my interpretation of Ledeneva's work is correct, informal networks in Russian society are necessary to ensure the functioning of society. In line with Groat's perspective, she holds that the formal framework does not function sufficiently in practice, which forces individuals to find alternatives outside the formal hierarchy in order to deal with their daily issues. Ledeneva's approach fits neatly with the growing interest for research addressing the use of informal networks as a way of getting things done within an organization (Flap, Bulder and Völker 1998, 132). By explaining the relationship between the formal structure and informal networks in Russian society, Ledeneva offers a valuable element to the debate on the impact or outcome of informal networks. In her terms, these are "power" networks (Ledeneva 2013, 4) or "personal" networks (Ledeneva 2013, 30). My conclusion is that Ledeneva uses the term "power networks" to emphasize the influence these networks have on the decision-making process in Russian society.

INFORMAL NETWORKS FROM A RUSSIAN PERSPECTIVE

Ledeneva is one of the few authors to explain the use of informal networks in Russian society from a Russian perspective (Ledeneva 2013, 50–84). Ledeneva – and to a certain degree Pastukhov (2002) – discuss values and barriers of informal networks in Russian society but also how informal networks are related to formal institutions. Their studies are more detailed than Groat's perspective especially in terms of how formal and informal networks can have an impact on the daily lives of individuals and formal organizations. The aim of this section is first to explain Russian perspectives of personalized networks and second to elaborate these perspectives to HEIs operating in Russia.

Ledeneva's (2013, 252–253) main argument is that informal practices such as the use of informal personal contacts in order to circumvent formal institutions such as bureaucratic procedures or regulations are an obstacle on Russia's path to modernization. Although the focus is on informal networks, informal practices can include a variety of activities from selective enforcement of formal rules to personalized networks. Selective enforcement, or custom law, is understood as the use or abuse of the legal framework to serve interests outside the legal domain, violating the spirit of the law, not its letter (Ledeneva 2006, 12–14; Pastukhov 2002, 71; Lauth 2000, 40). Before dealing with informal networks in Russian society in more detail, it is necessary to briefly

discuss some characteristics of the formal structure, such as formal laws and bureaucratic procedures but also hierarchical structures or procedures for internal reporting in Russia.

The formal framework is differently understood in Russia than in the West. In Russia there is a difference, for instance, between the written word and practical realities. Law and justice – to be understood as norms representing what is regarded as fair and not – are not necessarily the same. In the Western world and Northwest Europe in particular laws and formal systems are – at least by the majority of the population – regarded as fair and just.

A second explanation for the gap between formal structure and the situation in practice is that in Russia formal regulations and bureaucratic procedures can be difficult to comply with. Formal regulations can be complicated, not just because the text itself is unclear, but because of inconsistency between regulations from different governmental levels and because of the enforcement strategy of Russian regulatory agencies in general. The principle "everybody is guilty unless prove not guilty", which is embedded in the enforcement strategy outlined by Pastukhov (2002, 70–71), is a good example of this approach. The literature provides many examples of this (Pastukhov 2002; Gustafson 2012; Ledeneva 2006; 2008). The formal structure, such as law but also internal formal procedures can be so complex and demanding (requiring a new application procedure if there is any minor change or mistake in the initial version) that organizations or individuals have to consciously or unconsciously bypass the formal procedure, for instance, by faking the documents (Pastukhov 2002, 73). Relevant examples for the education sector can be found in Sandler (2014, 18), and Balzer (2010, 59–60), identifying the challenges of Russia's educational system in terms of visa requirements, registration procedures, and employment rules for foreign specialists.

The formal framework of Russian society is complicated, compared to that of Norway, for example, it was not created at once but was rather driven by changing political ideologies and economic development of a country which was first a prominent member of the Soviet Union and is now considered to be a country of rapid economic development. Since 2001, Russia has been counted as one of the four big emerging economies, so-called BRIC countries. The "BRIC countries" are Brazil, Russia, India and China, all seen as having reached a stage of rapid economic development (Goldman, Sachs & Co. 2001). Each period, from the ruling Communist Party through the Yeltsin years

and later under Vladimir Putin's first two terms as president, introduced a new set of laws and policies, without necessarily replacing the ones that came before (Gustafson 2012, 385). A result of these complexities is that personal networks are valuable and sometimes even necessary to get things done, not only for officials but also for ordinary citizens (Ledeneva 2013, 253). In Russia, such networks are often taken for granted and hence differently understood than in Western societies where they are frequently associated with shadow deals, corruption, or bribes.

Informal practices such as personalized networks did not first emerge under Vladimir Putin's terms as president. During the Soviet Union formal laws, rules, and procedures were frequently bypassed to obtain particular goods and services in short supply, or simply in order to comply with the formal demands (Ledeneva 1998, 3). These practices were called *blat* and became a tradition in Russian society, perhaps even a part of Russian culture, and when Russia during the 1990s was in its first years of economic and social development, these practices that had been so useful during the Soviet period could and would not disappear overnight; and like most institutions in Russia during this particular period, HEIs faced financial and institutional difficulties (Androushchak 2014, 10).

Hence, informal practices such as personalized networks are a part of Russian society, or in Ledeneva's (2013, 50) terms, part of Russia's *sistema*. Ledeneva (2013, 81–83) describes these networks as channels of informal governance for allocating resources. "Useful friends" or "core contacts" gain such benefits as access to particular resources (ibid). In Ledeneva's view, informal networks are characterized by unwritten rules and informal codes, and are channelled by a power concentrated on the top (patron) or gatekeeper (ibid.). Ledeneva (2013, 83) argues that informal networks are frequently based on personal loyalty towards the patron and can have their own system of checks and balances regarding responsibility and punishment. Informal relationships of trust and alliances matter and provide, ironically enough, more "stability", "protection" and "predictability" than the formal institutions, which relates to the limited performance of the state in protecting individual rights (Ledeneva 2013, 83; Lauth 2000, 28). It is the patron or kinship structure rather than the formal structure that can provide "useful friends" or "core contacts" not only with stability, protection and predictability but also a helping hand to deal with the complicated formal structure. Using personal networks should not be regarded as an informal practice as such, but when personal networks are used – consciously or not – in order to circumvent formal procedures because the formal framework is not able to fulfil

the demand or is practically impossible to comply with, or when such networks are used to exercise power or influence rather than through the formal hierarchy, such practices are to be understood as informal practices.

Thus, according to a Russian perspective, belonging to a network community which builds on loyalty towards a patron, political party, or association could secure the opportunities or fulfil the needs that should be guaranteed by formal institutions "under normal circumstances". Examples are preferential appointments, state-support, business ventures, jobs, assistance in problem-solving, etc. This itself is not uniquely Russian and perhaps in some cases not even different from informal networks from a Western perspective as outlined above. What is different is the extent to which informal networks from a Russian perspective need to compensate for the weakness of the formal institutions. The need to provide trust and support in a relatively less stable environment is – from a Russian point of view – considered more significant.

Informal networks, whether we call them power networks or personalized networks, are embedded in both public and private sectors and are therefore assumed to be part of the decision-making process in Russian HEIs as well. The administration of a federal or state university is perceived to face the same challenges as most other organizations, corporations, or individuals in terms of dealing with the challenges and opportunities of the formal structure, e.g. to comply with regulations and strategies, or to follow formal procedures. Although more research needs to be done on how informal networks influence the decision-making process of HEIs in Russia, it is – based on the theoretical overview discussed above – assumed that informal networks play an important role in the decision-making process of these institutions. This is not necessarily in terms of bypassing particular local or federal regulations or circumventing time-consuming bureaucratic procedures to ensure that a particular deadline is met, but in terms of personalized networks through which influence, power, or goods are channelled.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this article has been to illustrate two different theoretical perspectives with regard to informal networks: a Norwegian (Western) and a Russian perspective. If we seek to study the outcome or importance of informal networks within educational institutions across different states – even if these institutions cooperate closely with each other within one geographical region as we have seen with educational cooperation in the Barents region – we first need to understand how such networks are understood in

both states, and how they have a different impact on the daily lives of the citizens. Such different perspectives, as outlined in this study, make it challenging to argue for the existence of one common informal network, study the impact of informal networks on internationalization processes, or identify the participants of such networks.

Both theoretical perspectives emphasize the effectiveness of informal networks in achieving personal objectives or in circumventing formal procedures. Informal networks can often explain the discrepancy between actual behaviour and the formal framework – or formal institutions. While informal networks are publicly recognized both in Russian and Norwegian society – including HEIs – it is complicated to identify their outcomes because their configuration or development is difficult to observe empirically. Future research is therefore needed in order to determine the exact role of these networks with regard to decision-making processes in higher education. If we seek to understand the differences in both perspectives, however, we should analyse the formal structure rather than the informal network(s). Informal networks are perceived differently because the formal framework in which they operate is different. The complexities of the formal framework of Russian society is one of the main explanations for the formation of informal social groups, whereas from a Norwegian/Western perspective individual preferences or assumptions seeking to explain the role of informal networks in the formal decision-making process are seen as major contributors for the development of networks outside the formal structure.

As one of the few Western scholars Groat (1997, 40) emphasizes a link between the formal structure and the development of informal networks by arguing that the shortcomings of the formal "organization" result in the creation and shaping of informal networks. As concluded before, however, most research from a Western perspective is focused on the outcomes of informal networks or on the role of the individual within these networks (individual demands and needs as means to solving unexpected problems). Although Groat (1997, 41) addresses the weaknesses of the formal structure as an explanation for the development of informal networks, a broader study of Western literature with regard to these networks illustrates a different premise than Ledeneva's Russian perspective. Ledeneva and to a certain extent Groat suggest that when the formal structure does not function well enough in practice, individuals are basically forced to find alternatives outside the formal framework in order to fulfil their demands or deal with their daily issues. It is in the formal structure not being able to fulfil the demand for stability, protection, and predictability that we can find an explanation for why informal networks are perceived differently in Russia and the West. In Groat's

(1997, 41) words, "the formal gap that needs to be bridged" is simply bigger in Russian society and therefore, has a different impact on the employees' daily lives.

To illustrate some of these impacts – while also acknowledging that informal networks are extremely hard to monitor – let us assume that informal networks are operative among employees of a particular university in the Barents region, and that individuals within these networks have a substantial influence on the outcomes of the formal decision-making process. Such a network is obviously larger than one person – say the rector – and could include several people in key positions, for instance vice-rectors and coordinators of international cooperation. If, one network and its members (patron, liaisons and/or bow ties as "a network in which many players are dependent on a single employee but not on each other" defined by Krackhardt and Hanson 1993, 111) is substituted by another network with its own members, this could have an impact on the policy or strategy of the HEI in question, for instance in the field of internationalization, especially when the network swap affects individuals which whom foreign partner institutions have over time established good contact. Such an argument is based on the assumption that Russian society consists of several networks each with its own patron. In the alternative version people would compete with each other within *one* network, something that would be in conflict with the members' loyalty towards the patron, Ledeneva (2013, 38–39) describes this as an essential characteristic of these informal networks.

Further research is needed, however, to determine to what extent informal networks influence the outcomes of the decision-making process of HEIs in the Barents region, for example in terms of internationalization. Future research could also clarify whether we can identify an international informal network of representatives from different HEIs across the Barents region – as one of the questions surrounding the NORRUSS project suggests – and whether the theoretical perspectives outlined in this study are relevant and applicable to such a network.

Finally, as this article suggests, informal networks are not uniquely Russian. What is uniquely Russian, however, is their nature: the relationship of informal networks with the formal structure. Understanding this relationship is essential before identifying or comparing informal networks across different states in the Barents region and valuable if we seek to explore the outcomes of these networks, or examine the degree to which their actions are guided by formal structures.

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